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ABSTRACT

The impact of external and internal factors on the professional lives of lecturers in two schools at the Western Australian Institute of Technology was studied in 1979. The study sought to determine the effects of social, economic, and political factors affecting higher education, including declining funds, and fluctuating student demand for higher education. Lecturers from the Schools of Applied Science, and Business, and Administration were interviewed. Almost all respondents indicated that their workload had increased over the past several years, resulting from increased class sizes, continuous assessment, postgraduate teaching, and other factors. The majority indicated that there had been a progressive deterioration in the provision of resources necessary to support the teaching process, particularly in the library. All respondents but one reported increased involvement in administration, often without compensatory time allowances. Almost half of the respondents perceived staff morale to be lower in late 1979 than for the previous five years, due to such factors as workload, confusion over institutional reward systems, and openness of communication at various levels. All respondents perceived virtually no prospects for promotion in the near future and favored the introduction of a new career progression scheme, with clear, consistent, and public criteria for progression. Despite the increasing emphasis on research, all respondents indicated that they lacked time for research pursuits. There was strong view that a three to five year contract period should be available. (SW)

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Western Australian Institute of Technology
DIVISION OF ACADEMIC SERVICES

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Impact Study: Staff Perceptions of their Professional Lives

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July, 1980

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT UNIT

SUMMARY REPORT

IMPACT STUDY : STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL LIVES

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JULY, 1980

An exploratory study of the impact of external and internal factors on the professional lives of lecturers in two Schools of study at WAIT.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was based on the belief that institutional decision making on matters of policy, procedure or management concerning academic staff and their work is assisted by consultation with staff, and the reporting of data on their views, perceptions and suggestions. The project would not have been possible without the co-operation of lecturers in the School of Business and Administration and the School of Applied Science, who gave generously of their time for interviews. We wish to sincerely thank those staff for their assistance. We are also grateful to Deans and Heads of Department in the two Schools, all of whom gave support to the project. The most helpful encouragement and assistance of Steve Forte, President of the Academic Staff Association, is also acknowledged. Finally, I would like to express my personal appreciation to John Williamson, who bore the major burden of the conduct of the project. His contributions during the second half of 1979 to the Educational Development Unit, and particularly to this project, were made possible through a secondment from the School of Teacher Education; the co-operation of the School in facilitating this arrangement is gratefully acknowledged.

Alan Lonsdale
EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT UNIT

August 1980

In the latter half of 1979, a study was undertaken by the Educational Development Unit to investigate academic staff perceptions of the impact of the "steady state" on their professional lives. The study was conducted in association with similar projects at the University of New South Wales and Monash University.

Structured interviews were conducted with a random sample of staff at the lecturer level in the Schools of Applied Science, and Business and Administration, on the Bentley campus.

Almost all respondents indicated that their workload had increased over the past several years. This arose from various factors, including increased class sizes, continuous assessment, post-graduate teaching, and the increased use of part-time staff. The majority also considered that there had been a progressive deterioration in the provision of resources necessary to support the teaching process, particularly in the library.

All respondents but one reported increased involvement in administration, often without compensatory time allowances. In part, the increased administrative load for tenured staff was seen as arising from the use of short-term contract staff.

Almost half of those interviewed perceived staff morale to be lower in late 1979 than for the previous five years. The factors affecting morale included workload, decreased promotional prospects, confusion over institutional reward systems, changes in study leave provisions, and openness of communication at department, School and Institute levels.

All respondents perceived virtually no prospects for promotion in the near future. Most were not concerned about possible redundancy; they were attracted by early retirement schemes. In the absence of clear criteria for promotion, staff perceived "informal" criteria such as political activity and personal links as important. Research activity was seen as increasing in importance in the institutional value system. All respondents

sought the introduction of a new career progression scheme, with clear, consistent and public criteria for progression.

Despite the increasing emphasis on research, all respondents indicated that the present time demands on staff make the effective conduct of research very difficult. The resulting competing demands on staff time were perceived to cause increasing tension and negative staff reactions. Increasingly, external financial support for research was being sought, and gained.

Tenured staff were critical of the contract system of employment, believing that their contract colleagues were being exploited, were less committed and contributed insufficiently to departmental administration. There was a strong view that a three to five year contract period should be available.

Many staff stressed the importance of leadership style, at the School and departmental level, in influencing staff motivation.

INTRODUCTION

In the latter half of 1979, a study was undertaken at WAIT to investigate staff perceptions of the impact of the "steady state" of their professional lives. The study was conducted by the Educational Development Unit in conjunction with similar projects at the University of New South Wales and Monash University.

The study grew out of a recognition that there were a number of social, economic and political factors impinging on tertiary institutions and their staff which have not been evident before. These factors are various, and include for example, the general decrease in funds available for higher education, diminished career prospects and deteriorating conditions of service of academic staff, and fluctuating student demand for higher education. At the same time, changing community attitudes are reflected in statements by leading educators, politicians and community leaders expressing concern at employment opportunities for graduates, and calls for greater accountability in higher education.

Such factors have direct and indirect influences on the professional lives of academic staff. These influences are not isolated to any particular area of a staff member's responsibilities; rather, they have implications across the total spectrum

of professional activities, including teaching, administration, research, staff-student relations and community oriented activities.

The major purpose of the study was to gather information on the perceptions of WAIT staff concerning the impact of these various factors on their work as academics. In so doing, the study sought staff perceptions of changes in their professional lives over the past few years. The study was exploratory, aiming to identify key factors and possible relationships with a view to improving our understanding of how academic staff view the current situation, guiding further research and aiding institutional decision making.

The data were gathered through individual interviews using a structured interview schedule. The interview was chosen as the data gathering procedure since a flexible, exploratory approach was needed to identify variables and possible relationships, to suggest hypotheses and to guide further phases of this, and any consequent study. The interviews sought information relating to teaching, departmental or school administrative work, the perceived quality of institutional life, career prospects and commitment to research and publication. Staff perceptions of how their work as academics in late

1979 compared with their perceptions of several years earlier were examined. The data, in the form of statements and assertions by academic staff, were summarized and are reported here in terms of proportions of respondents.

Staff interviewed were drawn from the School of Applied Science and the School of Business and Administration on the Bentley campus. A stratified (by department) random sample of eighteen staff from each School at the lecturer level were invited to participate in the study. The study concluded with over 75% participation. Among the reasons for choosing staff to be interviewed at the lecturer level, two were of particular importance. The first was that the career grade of lecturer appeared, in 1979, to be the professional designation most academics would be employed under at WAIT. The second was that by choosing the lecturer grade a number of non tenured staff were included in the sample.

It is important to emphasize the restricted and exploratory nature of the study. The sample was drawn from only two of the eight Schools of study at WAIT. Within each School, only a limited number of staff at the lecturer level were interviewed. It is not possible, therefore, to generalize from the data to all staff in these Schools, or to the

Institute as a whole. The value of the study lies in its identification of the range of factors perceived by staff to be important in influencing their professional activities in qualitative, rather than quantitative, terms.

Over 85% of the staff interviewed from the School of Business and Administration had more than five years experience teaching at WAIT. The remainder had all taught at WAIT for at least one year. All held a first degree (or equivalent), and most had further or post graduate qualifications. In the School of Applied Science, more than two thirds of the respondents had more than eight years experience teaching at WAIT. The remainder were either non tenured "contract" staff who had been at WAIT for a minimum of one year, or tenured staff who had been at WAIT for more than three years. Over 90% had qualifications beyond an initial degree, and over half had a Master's degree or doctorate.

While the major emphasis in the interviews was with the influence of such external factors as student demand, financial provisions, government policies and employment prospects, or with the various indirect effects of external factors such as institutional personnel policies, the interviews indicated that other institutional and departmental factors interacted with these, and the combination

was sometimes the major determinant of the local climate or environment affecting an academic's professional life. To enable a more balanced picture to be presented, where appropriate this report makes reference to such internal factors.

PERCEPTIONS RELATING TO TEACHING

All but two respondents reported that their workload had increased over the past several years. A variety of factors were identified as contributing to this increase. Over half the staff asserted that the number of students in their classes had risen significantly, and as a result, the amount of marking and student consultation led to a substantial increase in workload. Several stated that this increase was aggravated by the introduction of continuous assessment, and indicated that, as a consequence, they were considering reverting to formal end-of-semester examinations. A further complicating factor for some arose from their involvement in the teaching of a range of subjects, resulting in increased preparation time. The increased involvement of the Institute in post-graduate teaching also contributed to workload problems. The more time consuming preparation and consultation involved in teaching at this level was not adequately reflected in staff allocations.

Further, a number of staff expressed concern about the additional workload associated with the preparation of accreditation submissions relating to the introduction of new teaching programmes, particularly at the post-graduate level.

One institutional response to economic pressures has been the increased use of part-time staff as tutors or demonstrators. Full-time staff indicated that this often contributed significantly to their workload due to the necessity to co-ordinate part-time staff and their teaching, and the provision of advice to inexperienced teachers. Further, a small number of staff considered that their part-time colleagues were less committed to the Institute and students; as a result, full-time staff had to "make up the difference". While an increasing proportion of the teaching is being conducted by part-time tutors/demonstrators, almost half the respondents in the Applied Science area perceived that the actual number of part-time staff appointed to conduct this increased amount of teaching was actually diminishing, thereby placing greater demands on full-time staff.

The majority of respondents expressed concern over what they thought to be a progressive deterioration in the resources necessary to support the teaching process. Almost half commented on problems arising

from cuts in library provisions resulting from reductions in budgetary allocations. As a consequence, increasing difficulties were being experienced in the availability of up-to-date reference materials, and through reductions in opening hours and other services.

In the School of Business and Administration, all but two respondents indicated that the quality of students had either remained "about the same" or "had improved". Several indicated that this resulted from the increasing proportion of mature age students. However, in the Applied Science area, almost half the respondents considered that the quality of students enrolled in their courses had decreased slightly over the past few years. There was a wide-spread feeling that the teaching process was now more demanding, as more remedial or "basic" teaching was necessary.

Staff were unanimous in their assertion that it was extremely difficult to stay up-to-date with changes and advances in their discipline. They saw, in the immediate future, that this would become even more difficult, given the current circumstances concerning teaching loads, administrative responsibilities and the increasing pressures to engage in research and external consulting activities.

PERCEPTIONS RELATING TO INVOLVEMENT IN ADMINISTRATION

As part of a large educational institution such as WAIT, there is a recognition by academic staff that they will be involved in the administration of their department or school. The term "administration" as used here is multi-dimensional, and ranges from activities immediately connected with the teaching of particular subjects, through service on department or school committees, to responsibility for particular professional activities.

All respondents but one reported an increase in their involvement in administration. The reasons for this ranged from more clerical type activities such as student enrolment, to the co-ordination of teaching requiring consultation with a number of full-time or part-time colleagues, and, in the Applied Science area, increased administrative liaison with other Schools resulting from service teaching activities. Remembering that all respondents were at the lecturer level, it is notable that many indicated that increasingly, administrative tasks were being devolved to them from the head of department and senior lecturer level, without the provision of compensatory time allowances.

On a number of occasions, staff commented that they perceived the administrative work of heads of department to be increasing; much of this could be

proficiently carried out by a clerk, hence freeing heads for academic leadership.

A number of the tenured staff indicated that non tenured colleagues were not required to do administrative work not directly related to the teaching of their courses. This perception, however, was not shared by the non tenured staff interviewed.

PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL LIFE

All respondents reported positive relationships with students, frequently using such phrases as "good contact with students", "an open door for students", or "a lot of contact with students".

However, just under half stated that they perceived staff morale to be lower in late 1979 than for the previous five years. A number commented on colleagues who made a minimal contribution. Several stated that their own attitudes to their work had changed and, as a consequence, they were "working less for WAIT". For a couple, it was necessary to look outside WAIT for "interest". Almost all the respondents indicated that they were now spending less time at WAIT than in the past. A number of these reported that they were more engaged in outside consulting work, or had a business, or were developing professional contacts.

All but five respondents, three of whom were non tenured, were critical of changes in their conditions of employment relating to annual leave or study leave. Phrases such as "extremely disappointed", "bitter about the cuts", "loss of conditions a blow", and "changes in conditions a scandal" were used by the overwhelming majority. One stated that he was "cheesed off with the changes in conditions", and that in particular, "the study leave change was a disgrace".

Staff in all areas highlighted the importance of adequate communication within departments and Schools, and from the Institute's central administration, as an important factor in keeping them informed about developments and policy changes. A general view was that openness of communication and an increase in consultative decision making is an important factor influencing morale.

PERCEPTIONS OF CAREER PROSPECTS

All respondents perceived few or virtually no prospects for promotion within the near future. All indicated that opportunities for promotion had been better in the past, using such phrases as "waiting for a dead man's shoes" or "only if the senior lecturer retires". A number reported that had they perceived the curtailment of promotional opportunities earlier they may have

made different career decisions at that stage. (The Institute temporarily discontinued its career advancement scheme in 1977. A new scheme is yet to be introduced).

Over half the respondents indicated that they would consider taking a position elsewhere - the majority however qualified this response by stating that they would not leave Perth or Western Australia, mainly for family reasons.

The majority of respondents were not concerned about possible redundancy threats. However, most of these indicated that they would be attracted by an early retirement scheme which enabled them to retire in their early fifties if they were financially secure. Older staff tended to be those more concerned with questions of redundancy and early retirement - often younger staff said they had not considered these issues.

Partly as a result of the discontinuation of the career progression scheme, institutional criteria for promotion are unclear to academic staff. In the School of Business and Administration all but one respondent perceived no consistent formal "academic" criteria for promotion. In each department at least one respondent characterized the current situation as one of no criteria at

all. In the School of Applied Science all staff saw academic qualifications beyond an initial degree and community links as essential. Other criteria mentioned included research or industrial experience and the ability to attract research funds. The latter criterion was seen as increasing in importance. Several factors mentioned by a number of staff as not being important were: excellence in teaching, length of service and concern for students. It was not surprising then that respondents in both Schools considered other more informal criteria as important, using such phrases as: "you need to be political", one had to be "part of the personal network", while others stressed "friendship with the head of department" or the "old boy network".

Several staff perceived that recent appointments to more senior positions had been based on such criteria, creating some ill feeling within the School. In the School of Applied Science, some staff expressed concern over the increasing importance of research as a criterion for promotion.

All respondents sought the introduction of a reward structure which would recognize continued professional development. They also saw an urgent

need for the introduction of a new career progression scheme, with clear, consistent and public criteria for promotion.

PERCEPTIONS RELATING TO RESEARCH

WAIT, perhaps more than other large multi-purpose CAE's in Australia, has increasingly emphasized goals other than the excellence of teaching. There are many reasons for this, including the breaking down of the dichotomy between the development of knowledge and its application, and the desire by a highly qualified staff to utilize their skills to the maximum.

Across the entire sample, all respondents but one reported an increased emphasis upon research and development activities. Various reasons were given for this increased emphasis. These included the necessity to be involved in research if one was teaching post-graduate students, the intrinsic value of research for professional development, and the increasing importance of research as a criterion for promotion. The increasing institutional encouragement to be involved in research was seen as arising from a progressive change in the institutional ethos, resulting in strong encouragement from senior academic staff (particularly in the School of Applied Science). At the same time, three

respondents in the School of Applied Science saw themselves primarily as teachers and would "dabble" in research rather than becoming heavily involved in it.

Despite the increasing emphasis on research, a concern expressed by all respondents was that the present time demands on staff make the effective conduct of research very difficult. A statement by one respondent, which was echoed in a number of ways, was: "I do too much teaching at present to be able to do research". Another stated "research is not recognized in our work conditions and we do not get a time allowahce for it". The resulting competing demands on staff time were perceived to cause increasing tension and negative staff reactions.

Staff in the School of Business and Administration perceived that internal financial support for research was insufficient. Applied Science staff had a similar view, indicating that external financial support was essential. Staff were increasingly successful in seeking such external funding. The provision, through external funding, of additional technical support personnel was of particular importance; in this way the limited academic staff time available for research could be more effectively utilized.

Whereas Business and Administration staff felt funds for conference attendance, or to enable other forms of interaction with professional colleagues were sufficient, this was not the case in the Applied Sciences. Of the latter group, most stated that conference funds had been cut severely. This was a cause for concern, as conferences were an essential part of the professional life of a scientist, particularly when researching a new area of knowledge.

Most respondents in both Schools did not indicate any reduction in their publishing activity over the recent past. Interestingly, the majority of respondents in the School of Applied Science perceived that individually, they were publishing less than others in the School.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONTRACT SYSTEM OF EMPLOYMENT

It is understandable that in times of uncertainty, educational institutions would strive to create maximum staff flexibility. Some of the decisions that are likely to be made at an organizational level, therefore, may not be equally well received by all staff. The question of non tenured contract staff may be seen to fall into this area.

Since the survey sample included contract staff, data were obtained on the perceptions of tenured staff concerning their non tenured colleagues,

and the perceptions of contract staff about their professional lives at WAIT. The following data were drawn from respondents in both Schools.

Many tenured staff saw their contract colleagues as being exploited in such areas as entitlement to PEP and superannuation. The majority of tenured staff saw themselves as doing more of the administrative work connected with the running of a department. This was often explained as a consequence of the contract system, where the non tenured member is relatively transient, and there is insufficient continuity and time for him to contribute to administrative tasks.

Many tenured staff expressed the view that their department had lost an excellent staff member because of the inflexibility of the contract system.

The non tenured staff felt that they had "to over-prove themselves." One respondent stated that he thought tenured staff as a whole displayed less commitment to their job and asserted that it was an injustice to have a non tenured staff member doing more than a tenured member.

Non tenured staff were concerned about the need to spend at least the last six months of their contract seeking another position and that this was likely to result in a decreased work performance.

Non tenured staff listed many of the often small, but significant aspects of fitting into a new department as difficulties. For example, lack of information regarding the ordering of texts, lack of institutional support to assist in the settling-in process, and the fact that a contract appointment can exclude some styles of research because of the time constraint, were identified as problems.

There was a common feeling throughout the entire sample that a two to three year contract was not long enough and a three to five year period was suggested. It was also suggested that a successful three year "contract" staff member should be able to have his or her contract extended to five years.

OVERALL VIEW OF IMPACT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

At the conclusion of the interview, respondents were asked to reflect on their previous statements, and to judge if their professional lives had been positively or negatively affected by changes occurring over the past few years. They were also asked to suggest the direction their department or School should take in the future.

All respondents but one stated that their conditions of employment had changed for the worse. They frequently used such statments as: "conditions

decreased substantially", "decline in conditions" and "negative changes." The statement that WAIT academics are "worse off than workers in other comparable situations" was variously expressed by several staff. As a result, a number of respondents said that they had developed a general dissatisfaction with the Institute. It was suggested by some that the academic staff should work to their contract conditions.

Several respondents in the Applied Science area coupled the decline in conditions with the increased emphasis upon research and said that this had created an intolerable situation. Their view was that if increased research activity was now expected and if this was an important part of the formal reward structure, it should be reflected in conditions of employment.

In addition to this agreement concerning the negative effects of changes in conditions of employment, there was often an additional important statement relating to leadership. Many staff stressed the importance of leadership style, at the School and department level, in influencing staff motivation. The Head of Department was seen as important in facilitating development in new areas of research and teaching. This necessitated a leadership style which promoted an atmosphere of harmony and enthusiasm.

In the School of Business and Administration, the importance of continuing to foster and strengthen links between the department and the outside community was stressed by nearly all respondents. Several also suggested that their department should move into new areas of interest where they could stimulate community awareness.

A number felt that the School should award doctoral degrees, become more rigorous, and be concerned with the quality of students rather than the quantity. Similarly, over fifty percent of respondents in the School of Applied Science felt that the School should have a doctoral programme.